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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the term "style" as it relates to the arts points to the need for reform in the terminology and the conceptual system of the drama profession. The paper first lists the basic tasks of conceptual and terminological reform and then outlines the steps necessary in reforming a particular term. These procedures are applied to a specific analysis of "style" and its meanings, resulting in the following tentative definition: "style" refers to the pattern of strategically individualized choices (of either matter or form) made within the latitude of an implicitly or explicitly defined task. (AEA)

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DEFINING "STYLE"
(with a strategy for general reform of theatre terminology)

The terminology and the conceptual system of our profession are in such disorder that we find it almost impossible to communicate clearly with each other or to think precisely and systematically beyond a superficial level. They have grown like Topsy, untended and randomly. Sporadic attempts have been made to reform it all, but they have failed for lack of scholars trained and free to do the work, for lack of general circulation of the few successes, and for lack of concern on the part of the profession generally. Now the UCTA Program in the Theory and Criticism of Drama and Performance has undertaken the task again. It is hoped that the human, financial, and organizational resources of the Program will give the new effort a greater chance of success. This discussion of the term "style" and its related concept is the first public act in the project, so we will discuss more than the term and concept; we will also describe the general problem and lay down a few ground rules.

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Does the need for reform require argument? Probably so. There seem always to be those among us for whom any talk of words is useless semantic quibbling. They have not caught on to one of the greatest discoveries of our time, that thought can be no more precise or orderly than the conceptual scheme and vocabulary in which all consciousness is inevitably conducted. They cling to private schemes and terms despite the evident need for a common convention. When the key terms of the trade are used in idiosyncratic ways by each new author and teacher, there can be no precise general communication and the language is devalued drastically. The terms and concepts most crucial to a profound understanding of our art are the ones most thoroughly abused; such key ideas as action, form, structure, meaning, and style have become buzz words, puff words, substitutes for communication, not its vehicles. The root of all this, it seems, is our disinterest in understanding our work profoundly. If we cared, we would not allow our tools to decay so.

The basic tasks of conceptual and terminological reform are these:

1- to delimit the territory (i.e. to learn, with precision, just what it is we have to talk and think about)

2- to divide this territory up, strategically, into a scheme of concepts in such a way that the concepts do not overlap, so that the territory is covered fully and with enough nuance to allow suppleness, agility, and accuracy in thought and talk

3- to attach terms to each of these concepts and sub-concepts, again strategically, so that they are easy to accommodate

and retain, and

4- to "sell" this scheme to the profession, realizing that new language systems can be "sold" only when their pragmatic values are made clear.

This is the responsibility undertaken by every discipline deserving of the name.

This is not a task for one man or for a few but for the profession. The work will begin, no doubt, with the individual labors of the few who care deeply, but the project will fail unless the first proposals are thoroughly processed by a much wider and more representative group of scholars and then given the blessing of whatever we have in the way of professional guardians. This is not a bright idea; this is standard procedure in disciplines more mature than ours.

The questions to be pursued never take the form "What is style ?" or "What does 'style' mean?" Language experts and philosophers have shown that these are non-sense questions. The questions which matter are of this kind: "How may we usefully delimit the territory (or territories) which have vaguely been intended by the term 'style'?" or "What shall we mean when we say 'style'?"

So, how does it stand with 'style'? The term is popular, important, and has no precise, common concept attached to it which would give it general communicative value and allow us to find ways of coping with style in production and in the classroom. Though there have been partial successes in the effort to describe

the dramaturgic styles of individual playwrights, there has been no equivalent work in the area of production style and no effort to integrate the two. As a result, we have no productive way of relating dramaturgic style to production style. We have uncountable performances in which production style is ill-matched with dramaturgic style, but we have no common means to discuss these failures in the classroom or in the theatre and so we lack a strategy for eliminating these production failures.

Do not think that the traditional generic categories fill this need (e.g. Expressionistic drama and Expressionistic scene design). These clumsy and over-generalized ideas have done us more harm than good. Their greatest value is that they provide simple exam questions. They serve the comprehension of style as well as pick-axe and spade serve brain surgery. We require something of <u>much</u> greater complexity and subtlety, much better systematized.

So "style" needs work. How is such work productively done? Back to general principles: when seeking to reform a particular term, we:

1- survey all disciplines for whom the term is important (in the case of 'style', rhetoric, linguistics, and the critical arm of each of the Arts were of particular importance)
2- find out what definitions have been and are used in these fields, either explicitly or implicitly and find out what <u>work</u> the term does for them; don't synthesize at this point; collect every variation you can find or infer
3- without throwing away the individual definitions, synthesize those factors (if any) which are common to all of the

definitions and uses; if usage is too diverse to allow this, sub-divide and then synthesize as many common-factor definitions as are required. (Such conceptual confusion is common. Here is an example of one such which currently plagues theatre writers. The term "symbol" became current in the Arts as a label for something which signifies metaphorically, i.e. because of its resemblance, its necessary link with its significance. No problem. However, in a separate line of language development, "symbol" became a key term for those studying the broader problems of significance: linguistic and semantic scholars. For them, the term referred to a sign which was conventionally related to what it signified; the key thing about this symbol is that it is arbitrarily, not necessarily related to its significance. And so we have a significance system with only two major categories (natural signs and conventional signs) and they both have the same name. No problem so long as those who think about conventional signs operate in a different world from those who think about metaphorical signs. However, the evolution of our discipline has made it necessary for us to deal with both ideas. The result is massive confusion. When one uses the word "symbol" now, it is necessary to follow with a definition. Very inefficient.)

4- the synthesized definitions are compared to the definitions given or implied in theatre and the work the term has been used for in theatre.

5- then an extremely difficult step: the possibilities suggested by all we have done so far must be compared to related

concepts used in theatre; before we can decide on one concept, we must have a clear sense of how this will affect the larger task of re-conceptualizing the whole theatrical territory.

6- finally, in the light of all the above, a concept is carved out and the label is applied to it.

The success of this effort depends equally on skill in learning the territory to be covered and the work to be done, in synthesizing definitions, and in grasping the intramural and intermural implications of each possible way of slicing and defining. Hard work, but necessary.

The job is not really finished at this point. A conceptual tool is not ready for action until its functions in every aspect of our work are understood. This task is much larger than the job of defining and much more important, but it cannot begin until the defining work is finished.

Time doesn't allow re-tracing of all these steps as they apply to the idea of style. Conclusions will have to suffice. A thorough study of the uses and meanings of "style"[1] makes it clear that, however definitions may vary, the root concept includes all of these sub-concepts:

1- an act of choosing (consciously or non-consciously)

2- a maker who chooses

3- the perception of a regular pattern of choices from which a principle of choice can be inferred

4- the concept of latitude within implied limits

5- a task which creates the limits and latitude

6- strategic intent underlying the choice of the selective principle (again, either conscious or non-conscious, explicit or implicit)

7- the effect of strategic individualization.

The concept of style may usefully be applied to anything that is made; an object, an action, or an idea. At the foundation of our perception of style is necessarily a sense that this made thing is the product of a specific task undertaken, that it was meant to be something, not just anything. It is in the nature of human perception that we never see something in itself but only as an instance of a kind. No choice here, no "pure" perception, never full accommodation, always some assimilation of the new into the old.

Always in this concept of the old is a sense of limits, of a range of possibilities. Whoever made this did not have an infinite range of choices. His task limited his latitude in two ways: it required that certain things must be done lest the task be unfinished; it insisted that certain things might not be done or it would be a different task. These "must-bes" are called "parameters"; this sense of "may-not-be" is called "the limit of tolerance." Between is a range of latitude which varies in scope depending on the task and the situation. Here the maker must choose and, by choosing, strategically individualize what he makes and its effects, all without failing the task. This path selected through the area of latitude is style.

Most of us like short and tidy definitions. They are risky, but here is a first attempt: by "style" is meant the pattern of

individualizing, strategic choices, of either matter or form, made within the latitude of an implicitly or explicitly defined task.

This may not seem superior to the definition you now use or those you have heard before, but it has substantial values: it covers the ground we have generally intended, but more specifically and tangibly; it includes all of the factors which are necessary for the understanding of a style and excludes irrelevancies; above all, it clearly implies what one examines in order to understand style in a given work (task, latitude, pattern, individualization, and strategy) and it suggests the relative nature of these factors. That makes it useful, if not the most useful definition possible.[2]

When a maker's choices seem consistent and strategically valuable, we say the style is effective. When we can find no pattern or use in the choices, we say the style is clumsy or irrelevant. We find many other things to say about style. What we say will have more usefulness the more we come to understand how these choices are made, how relevance and consistency are achieved, what controls the perception of patterns, how to separate the effects of style from the effects of content and context, and the more skillfully we refine our system for thinking and talking about style.

The concepts of pattern, consistency, relevance, and effectiveness imply someone who perceives these qualities. They are not "there" until perceived. There is no objective truth to the existence, consistency, or effect of these qualities. The same is necessarily true of style. Style is a strictly theoretical idea: it is one of the ways we account for our experience and it is a very useful one indeed, if we comprehend the principle and

its workings finely enough.

Style is a very relative matter. When our sense of the task changes, our notion of what constitutes the latitude and the system of choice-making changes. For example, we may speak of the Pinter style when we conceive the task to be the writing of all of Pinter's scripts. The parameters and tolerance then are the very general ones of the task of script-writing in such a time and place. We might also consider the unique style of each Pinter script. The much narrower latitude from which these individualizing choices are made is the one of script-writing in the Pinter mode. This can go on for many more levels in both directions, wider or narrower. We may study the style of thought or speech or activity in one character or one scene. We might study the style of space and light use in a single production.

Broadening, we might study the style of modern playwrights compared to others or the style of drama compared to the task of fictional writing or the task of fictional writing compared to non-fiction. Etcetera. Whatever made thing we can focus on we may study stylistically to our profit. And always the question is this: <u>according to what principle of selection, within what range of latitude, in the service of what task, for what strategic purposes, has the maker executed these choices</u>?

Style, so conceived, is a prime critical and interpretive key. Useful criticism does three things: it describes the object of study, it describes the impact of that object, and it explains how the first of these brings about the second. Since style is the realm of choice, since choice (as Aristotle rightly said) is the prime revealer of identity, style is the interpreter's main

access to understanding of the work. It is important to remember that we do not interpret the style; we identify the style and rationalize its functions in order to interpret the work. Stylistic analysis is a tool of great promise too little refined in the theatre and well worth attention.

In carrying out this task, it is important to avoid the debilitating errors of the past: what the study of style wants is not a set of categories, no lists of possible styles. These have precisely the opposite of the desired effect; they serve to generalize, not to individualize, and the understanding of a particular work is first of all a matter of finding the nature and function of its individuality. To say that"this work is Expressionistic" tells no more than to say that "this person is a professor." It is a gross oversimplification which tells nothing of personality and is likely to provoke unwarranted assumptions. Give us descriptions and rationales, not labels; give us descriptions of the principle of choice which shapes the individual work and rationales of the strategy shaping those choices. We need to know how the maker's choosing affects us, or might affect us were we open to it. The more clearly we grasp these things, the more we will grow as understanders and as makers. Enough of this growth and we might even learn how to teach the effective use of style, not in the stifling, mechanical, old rhetorical way, but organically.

A few last thoughts:

- An absolute replica does not have style of its own but replicates the style of its model.

- Art makes no replicas.
- In any work of Art, we find layers of style; the style of the actual or implied original and the style of the re-creation.
- The style of each layer may be studied independently. Each variable within each layer may be studied independently. The fun and profit really begin when we undertake the study of the interaction among factors and among layers.
- It is possible that this understanding of style brings us back to Plato in terms which are more tolerable to modern minds and more pragmatically productive.

When style is conceived and defined carefully, the work has just begun. The next step is enormous. We must ask ourselves "what factors in theatre are part of the latitude and in what ways may choices involving these factors be made?". That is, "what are the variables, how may they be varied, and with what anticipatable effects?". The answer will require a systematizing of everything we do or say in or about theatre. It will be worth the effort.

If this should be achieved, still another tough job remains: to get the trade to use the concept carefully and fully. This will be hardest of all.

Until we undertake this chore and carry it through to completion, we will continue to speak more evocatively than communicatively. Evocation has its place, but it cannot support the full burden. A profession which cannot communicate precisely

about its most fundamental concerns is immature. That theatre is an Art in no way exempts it from this rule. The Program in the Theory and Criticism of Drama and Performance invites each of you to join in this important work.

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1 This study was possible because of a rare opportunity for extended teamwork provided by a seminar in Theorizing which I led at Bowling Green State University in 1978. For much of what I say about style, I am indebted to three bright and eager students: Kim Sharp, Robert Shank, and John Galyean.

2 Two things should be clear from this definition: 1) no made thing is "style-less"; style may be more or less obvious, efficient, delightful, etc., but choices must always be made within a latitude and that makes style inevitable. 2) our traditional way of using the term "stylized" is inappropriate; all made things which are not replicas are stylized, each in its own way. Style is a kind of abstraction. Abstractions are said to operate at higher or lower levels, depending on how severely we have stripped away specific information about the actual or implied original from which we have abstracted. Low abstractions give us much information about individuals; high abstractions give us more information about relations to other individuals. When we feel the urge to refer to a work as "stylized" we ought, instead, to describe its level of abstraction and the strategy underlying that choice.